

The History of Mary Wood,
THE HOUSE-MAID ;
OR,
The Danger of False Excuses.



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HISTORY OF MARY WOOD, &c.

MR. Heartwell, the worthy clergyman of a country parish, was sitting in the porch of his little parsonage, when he saw a figure rather flying than running down a hill near his house, the swiftness of whose motion made it hard to discern *what* she was, much less could he guess *who* she was. She fled directly towards him, and flung herself at his feet almost breathless; with difficulty she pronounced the words, "O Sir, save me! for pity's sake hide me in your house—they will be here in a moment—hide me this instant!—indeed I am innocent!" then without waiting for his answer, she jumped up, and rushed by him into the house; the good man ran after her, and catching her hand, led her up stairs into his bed-room, and putting her into a closet within it, told her no one should come there to hurt her. Then hearing a noise he looked out of his window, and saw several men and women running almost as fast as the young woman had before, and his maid Bridget (who had seen them sooner from her own window) running to meet them, and to ask what was the matter. He had forgotten to bid her be silent about the young woman, indeed he did not know that she had seen her; but the truth is, she was amusing herself in a very idle manner, with looking at the road out of her garret window, and had seen with great surprise the wild behaviour of the poor

girl, which raised her curiosity. This she now hoped to satisfy, by stopping the posse that was running by; instead of answering her questions, they asked if she had seen a girl about seventeen, that was running from justice, pass that way. "What, in a linen gown and green petticoat," said she, "without a bonnet, and her hair and her cap flying?" "The same, the same," they cried; "which way did she go?" "Why, what do you want to do with her?" says Bridget, "for I should be loth to betray the poor thing to any harm." "Why, you would not conceal a thief, would you?" said they. "She is a thief, and has robbed her master." "Nay, if she be a thief, she may rob *my* master too," says Bridget, "for she is gone up stairs with him." Upon this they all turned towards the house, and were coming in when Mr. Heartwell met them. He heard the last words, and was not a little disturbed at the idea of having the girl found in his house; for as she knelt at his feet, he thought he knew her face, and had by degrees recollected that, though much grown since he saw her, she must certainly be the daughter of Matthew Wood, an honest labourer, who had lived some years in his parish, and died three or four years before. The long illness before his death, had reduced his wife to such poverty, that she and her child would have perished, had not the good Vicar's charity helped out the scantiness of the parish

relief. Mr. Heartwell, after having buried the poor man, tried to find a place for the girl, and some help for her mother, who being in years, and her health much injured by fatigue and grief, in nursing and losing her husband, was quite unable to work. By applying to Lady Worthy, whose seat was a few miles distant, he had the good fortune to get her into one of the alms-houses which that good lady had built and endowed; here she was comfortably supported, and her daughter permitted to be with her till she could find a service. As by these means Goody Wood and her daughter were placed at a distance from him, Mr. Heartwell had not since seen them, but was satisfied that under Lady Worthy's protection they would be taken care of.

The people, who were now rushing into Mr. Heartwell's house, stopped on seeing him, and on his asking what they wanted there, one of the most decent-looking men stepped forward, and pushing the rest a little back, said, "I ax pardon, Sir, for our bouldness in coming in to your Worship's house, but we have got a warrant here for a young person that we be tould ran in here." "A warrant," said Mr. H. "Why, what is the matter? What has she done?"—"Please your Worship, she's a thief, and has robbed her master's house. We have had sad doings at our village-----Squire

Banks's house has been robbed too by his gardener and dairy-maid, and they are both gone off. This poor girl, I suppose, learnt their wicked ways (for she would keep company with them) and the same night that they made off, 'tis thought she had let them into farmer Boucher's house; and in the morning, as sure as can be, he found his bureau broke open, and his money gone." "But what proof is there that this girl was concerned in the robbery, or that she let in the robbers?" "Why, Sir, she had been telling a mort of lies about them, and that made them suspect her. So they searched her box, and as sure as can be, there they found, sealed up in a paper, six silver tea spoons of the Farmer's, with an E and B upon them, as his are marked with. She pertested they were none of his'n, but were given by a friend to keep for her, but, alack a-day! there is no believing a word that comes out of her mouth; so nobody minded her; and when we ax'd her who this friend was that gave them to her to keep, she was all as red as fire, and would not speak. So the farmer left us to take care of her, whilst he went to Justice Gallway's for a warrant. We had shut her up safe, as we thought, in a chamber, whilst we eat a bit of dinner, and drank a little of neighbour Boucher's ale, but when he came back, and went hither to take her, lo and behold she was not to be found. The

window was open, and as it was not very high from the ground, we guess she let herself down from it. We now set off in pursuit of her, all but the farmer, who being pretty fat and purfy, was not for running a race. So he gave us the warrant, and a boy telling us as how she took this way, we ran till we saw a woman running, about half a mile before us, but afterwards, we lost sight of her; and please your Worship, your maid tells us as how she made into this very house." "It is true," said Mr. Heartwell, "that she is in my house, and if you will consent to let her remain here a day or two, I will be answerable for her appearance when called upon. In the mean time I will endeavour to find out the truth; for it would be a sad thing to ruin such a young creature, by hurrying her to prison before we are sure of her guilt. Farmer Boucher is an honest humane man, he knows my character, and I dare say will oblige me by stopping all further proceedings against Mary Wood, and leaving her in my care, till I can talk to her, and bring her to declare the truth." "That's what she is not much used to, I am afraid, Sir," said the man; "howsomdever, I will tell neighbour Boucher what your Worship says, and you'll be pleased to take care that she does not get out of the window." "Boucher's wife is living, is she not? (said Mr. Heartwell) what does she say of the girl?"

She must know more of her character than her master can," "Yes, yes! she be living and looking, and a good kind of body she is, but at present she is from home, and knows nothing of all this bustle; she went two days ago to visit her father at Stoke. She is expected home to-night, and then your Worship may have the speech of her if you like." They then pulled off their hats, and civilly turned back to their village. Mr. Heartwell immediately went up to his prisoner, whom he found sunk on the ground in his closet, and half dead with terror; for she had heard a good deal of what had passed, and feared every moment that Mr. Heartwell would give her up to be dragged to prison. She knew she had been detected in some falsehoods that would make against her; and though she was not guilty of the robbery, she had enough to reproach herself with, to take from her all the comfort and confidence of innocence; she had, therefore, nothing less than the terrors of hanging, or being sent to Botany Bay, before her eyes.

But we must go back, and tell by what deceit poor Mary was first brought into trouble.

When first Lady Worthy took her up, she got her a place at Mrs. Trueby's, a widow lady of great piety and worth, who lived in the neighbouring town. She had a boy about six years old, her two maids

were growing old in her service ; she took this girl to help them. The next day after she came, she bid her own maid shew her how to sweep and dust the best parlour. The maid, after shewing her what she was to do, and giving her a great charge not to touch the pier glass, which she herself would clean, gave her a long broom, and left her to her sweeping. The little boy, who had not seen any thing so young and lively in the house, took a great fancy to Mary, who was no less fond of him : he staid in the room to see her sweep it, and she, to amuse him at the same time, gave him an account of the wonders she had seen performed in the street, the day before, by a balance-master, who poised a long pole on the palm of his hand, and even upon his nose, with other performances, which, though not wonderful in their kind, appeared so to her, who had never seen any thing like it. To make little Edward comprehend what she meant by this balancing, she attempted to poise the long broom, setting the small end on the palm of her hand, but not succeeding, it fell on one side, and unfortunately struck the pier glass, and broke it. Poor Mary cried out she was undone, and begged Edward, if he had any pity, not to say she did it. " Who then ? " said he, " you will not say it was I ? " " No, indeed," said she, " I will not lay it upon any body ; only don't you contradict what I

shall say. By this time Mrs. Trueby, who heard the smash of the glass, had hastened down stairs, and came into the room. "What glass did I hear crack?" said she—"O Mary! my precious pier glass, the best piece of furniture in my house, and a present from a dear friend, who is now no more, quite spoiled! I valued it above ten times its price! Is this your awkwardness, Mary?" Poor Mary stood pale and trembling, but answered, "No, indeed, Madam." "Who did it then?" said she, raising her voice. "A great bird, Madam, (I don't know whether it was a pigeon) flew in at the window. I tried to drive it out, and it dashed against the glass with its bill, and cracked it as you see." Little Edward, who was astonished at her invention and assurance, looked amazed, shrugged up his shoulders, and could scarce help laughing; his mother observed it, and so did Mary, who, giving him a wink, said, "Master Edward knows it is true, for he saw it as well as I." "O fye," Mary," said the boy—"that's too much—I would not have told of you, but when you say I know it to be true, you make me a liar as well as yourself; and my mamma says, if I tell lies, God Almighty will not love me." "Wicked girl," said the lady, "would you teach my child to lie?—pack up, and begone out of my house: and you, Edward, I charge you, tell me the truth." Upon this the child related the

fact, and added—"pray, Mamma, forgive her, it was in trying to divert *me* that she came by the accident." "No, my dear," said his mother, "I cannot forgive her: foolish and careless as it was, and grieved as I am for my favourite glass, I could have forgiven her my loss; and though I spoke hastily at first, I should soon have considered her awkwardness, and passed it over; but a girl that can so readily invent a lie, and try to draw you into it, I cannot possibly suffer to stay a day in my house: if you learnt to tell lies, it would break my heart." The good lady, however, fearing the girl might get into mischief, after much kind exhortation, determined herself to carry her back to Lady Worthy, assuring her that she would not have parted with the girl on account of the accident, had it not been for the daring falsehood with which she attempted to excuse it. Lady Worthy, equally shocked, sent for Goody Wood, and told her what had been her daughter's behaviour; adding, that she had put it out of *her* power to serve her, for she could never again venture to recommend her. The poor woman was quite overcome with grief, and did not dare to attempt to excuse Mary's faults, but took her home in an agony of sorrow, where the girl had the mortification to see that she had not only ruined herself, but made her mother completely miserable. And indeed the poor woman

became so ill, that she began to fear that she should be the cause of her death; this affected her very much, and for a time she was really penitent, and resolved never again to speak falsely; but so strong is custom, and so weak was the principle on which she acted in her mind, that when she saw her mother recover, she soon returned to her little tricks and false excuses. It was no wonder she did not reform, for she had no fear of offending God. Nobody took any notice of her, and the burthen of maintaining her fell heavy on her mother, and kept them both in extreme poverty. At length, a gentlewoman who knew her story, and was concerned that so young a creature should be ruined, was prevailed upon, as she had no children, to send for her. She asked the girl why she was dismissed from Mrs. Trueby's; to which she replied, "it was for breaking a pier glass." "And was that the only reason for her turning you away so suddenly?" The girl looked sullen, held down her head, and said, "I believe so." "Go," said the lady, "you will never do for me. I see you are not cured of your vile fault, and I will never take one whose word I can never depend upon." So, home went Mary, with a heavy heart, and, after trying to evade her mother's questions, was at last obliged to confess what had passed; this renewed all the grief of this poor parent, and

Mary was again in disgrace, and again promised to speak truth for the future, but never begged of God for his grace. Mary grew tall and strong, and was a well looking good humoured girl, lively, though kept down by poverty and disgrace. At last a farmer's wife, who lived about two miles from her mother's, took her as her servant, and was for some time well pleased with her. In the same village lived a gentleman, whose name was Banks; he was gone on a tour, and left his gardener and dairy-maid to take care of the house; these servants, who made very free with their master's property in every way, used to call in Mary when she went on an errand. The gardener gave her fruit, and the dairy-maid treated her with cream, and sometimes a syllabub. These calls required excuses from her for staying on her errands. One day they saw her passing by, they told her they were going in the evening to the fair, and asked her to go with them. She replied, she was sure she could not get leave to go that evening, for they were going to finish their great wash. "Pooh! pooh!" said they, "you *must* go—'tis the last day of the fair, and there is a tall woman and a dwarf, and I know not what, to be seen." Mary's curiosity was strongly tempted, and she said she would try what she could do. So she went to her mistress, and told her she had a message from her mother, to let

her know she was very ill, and begged she would, if possible, get leave to come to her. Mrs. Boucher (her mistress) was very good natured, and said she was loth to keep her from her mother on such an occasion, but did not know how to spare her, they were so very busy. Mary said, "if she would be kind enough to let her go at five o'clock, she would work very hard till then;" and to this her mistress consented. Before that hour, Mary ran up to her garret, dressed herself in a minute, and flew to Mr. Banks's time enough to join her friends setting out for the fair. When they had been gone about an hour, her mother, who unluckily had some business that way, called to ask her daughter how she did; the mistress, who herself let her in, was amazed to see her, and the poor woman was thunder-struck when she heard that the girl had pretended she was ill and had sent for her—and greatly alarmed to think where she could be gone. She went about the village inquiring for her, and at last met a countryman she knew, who told her she need not fear any harm, for he was just come from the fair, where he saw her daughter, with a man and woman, at a booth, choosing ribbons; this did not comfort the mother, who went back to implore the clemency of Mrs. Boucher towards her imprudent child. Moved by her tears, and considering the force of curiosity and vanity in a girl of se-

venteen, she at last promised not to turn her away if she made proper submission, but to try her a little longer.

As Mary was coming home in the evening, she met one who told her what a search her mother had been making for her; this threw her into a terror that spoiled all the pleasure she had enjoyed at the fair. She came home half dead with fear and fatigue, and threw herself at the feet of her mistress, confessing her fault, and making solemn promises never to repeat it. After severe reprimands, her mistress at length forgave her, on condition that she should never again, hold any acquaintance with that gardener and dairy-maid, of whom, she told her, she had heard a bad character. Mary wept, and promised every thing; and though the cream and the fruit were strong allurements, added to the civil things the gardener used to say to her, yet for some time she forbore her visits at Mr. Banks's, but by degrees the acquaintance was secretly renewed, which cost Mary a falsehood every time she was with these people, whose company her mistress had so positively forbidden. One day Mrs. Boucher went to pay a visit of two or three days, at her father's, a few miles off. The farmer could not go with her, for he was busy selling his grain, and getting his rent ready for his landlord; and had got the money in the house on the

Saturday, which he meant to pay away on the Monday.

On Sunday, after church, he went out, charging Mary to stay at home, and be careful of the house : her two friends from Mr. Banks's, took the opportunity of her being alone, to come and drink tea with her; they had got notice of the farmer's having sold his grain, and as they intended to rob their master's house, and go off with the spoil, the next night, the gardener thought he might as well take the farmer's money with him; he remembered he had once bought some dung for his garden of him, and saw him put the money in a bureau, in a little parlour.

While Mary was getting tea, the gardener pushed open the parlour door, and said, O here's a cleaver little cool room, let us remove the things in here. When they had got into that room, he saw the bureau, considered the lock, and then looking out at the window, he took occasion, unobserved by Mary, to examine the fastenings, and how he could easily get in at night. Whilst he was thus employed, one of the farmer's plough boys passing by, observed this man looking out at his master's window; he wondered at it, because he knew the farmer was not at home.

Mary took care to dismiss her guests before her master's return; and on his asking her if any one had been there, she replied

nobody. The next morning when Boucher came down into the little room, he saw his bureau broke open, and the cash that had been in it taken away.

The farmer inquired of all his people, and the ploughboy mentioned his having seen Mr. Banks's gardener looking out of the window, and said he had heard that the two servants had gone off that morning, and had robbed Mr. Banks's house of plate and whatever they could carry off. This, compared with what the ploughboy had observed, and with Mary's having denied that any body had been there, fixed their suspicion on her, as having been concerned in the robbery. She was forced to confess that Mr. Banks's servants were with her in the afternoon to tea, but strongly denied knowing any thing of the robbery; however they opened her box, there they found six new silver tea-spoons, marked with the first letters of Boucher's name, sealed up in a paper. The farmer knew his wife had six new ones from Dublin not long before, and doubted not these were the same. The girl's guilt now appeared plain.

But to return to Mr. Heartwell, whom we left entering the closet in which Mary was, as soon as her pursuers were gone. Though he by no means knew all that we have related of this unhappy girl, he saw that appearances were strong against her. Yet he was very unwilling to believe the

worst, and immediately raised her, with kindness, from the ground. “ Mary,” said he, “ if you will now be perfectly sincere with me, I will befriend you as much as justice will permit. I find the chief cause of your being so strongly suspected is, that you have departed from the truth ; this is always attended with great danger as well as guilt ; you have been enough instructed in religion, to know that deceit is hateful to God, that he has denounced dreadful punishment for liars—even ‘ the lake that burneth with brimstone and fire ;’ that he has commanded every one to put away lying, and to speak the truth to his neighbour from his heart ; that lying lips are an abomination to the Lord, but truth is his delight. For my part, I pity your youth, and I wish to save and serve you, but unless I can hope to cure you of this fault, I must with a grieved heart give you up to your wretched fate, for it is impossible for me to do you any good.” Whilst he spoke, his eyes filled with tears, and poor Mary cried without ceasing. She now tried to speak, but her sobs prevented her ; at last she said, “ I see, I see, that I have undone myself ; that even you who are so good will never more believe me, but give me up to misery and despair ; I would now most truly confess to you every thing, but you will not, you cannot believe me ! and I shall justly suffer for what I have not done, because I have made

myself unworthy of belief. O, Sir, what can I do? Is there no place for repentance? no good christian who will try me once again? Will you not at least hear me if you cannot believe me, whilst I tell you of all my sins, and the sad disgraces they have brought upon me?" "I will hear you," said the good old man, "but if you now deceive me, or hide any thing from me, I will never more concern myself about you, but must leave you to reap the bitter fruits of your baseness of heart." Mary now threw herself at his feet—kissed his hands, and bathed them with her tears. "O, Sir," she said, "God knows I have no wish to deceive, or to hide any thing from you, if I do, I consent that you will give me up for ever." She then told what we have before related. When she came to the article of the tea-spoons, he desired her to explain whose they were, and how she came by them. She told him, that on Sunday evening, when Mr. Banks's maid and gardener drank tea with her, the former, on going away, took her aside, and giving her a little parcel sealed up, begged of her to put that in her box, and keep it for her, till she sent for it; the reason of this she would tell her when they met again. She went away without giving Mary time to ask another question. She was confused when asked about the spoons, because she thought she would betray her friend, and because she

was ashamed to confess the intimacy she had kept up with her, against her mistress's orders, and her own promises. How the spoons came to be marked with Boucher's letters E. B. she could not imagine; for the woman's name who gave them to her was Sarah Fisher.

Mr. Heartwell kept Mary that night, and took pains to impress on her a deep sense of her sin. Next day they had a visit from Farmer Boucher, who told them that his wife, on her return, examined her drawer, and found the spoons safe as she had left them. They were marked with the same letters as these found in Mary's box; and as the farmer had scarce looked at them since they came home, he did not observe that the others were not exactly like them. As this was the only positive proof alleged against Mary, the farmer now promised to give her no farther trouble; though he still knew she had entertained the robbers the day before, on this account he would by no means take her again into his house, but paid her the little wages due to her, and dismissed her from his service. Mr. Heartwell, who was pleased to find her account so far true, tried to persuade the Bouchers to let her stay with them a little while at least, as a justification of her character; but they were so disgusted with her having kept up the acquaintance with those bad people, in defiance of their orders, and her

own promises, that they could not think themselves safe with such a servant in the house. And Mr. Heartwell, with all the compassion he felt for her, could not venture to press them not to answer for her future conduct. However, he promised, that if she kept her present resolutions, he would befriend her as much as he could. He put some proper books into her hands, and took her to her mother, whom they found almost distracted by the news which had reached her, of her daughter having been taken up for a robbery; the poor woman every day grew worse after this shock, and some weeks after, her wretched daughter received her dying forgiveness, but could not forgive herself for the anguish she had caused her mother, which, she was persuaded, had hastened her end.

Poor Mary had another sorrow. In the village where she had lived with Farmer Boucher, was a creditable baker; his son Thomas was bred up to the business, and was a very honest, sober, agreeable young man.

He had often bestowed kind looks and kind words on Mary, but had not ventured to make her an offer, as he thought his father would never consent to his marrying so poor a girl. She on her side liked him well enough to wish he would speak out. A little before the unfortunate affair at Boucher's, the old baker died, his son suc-

ceeded to his shop and all his property, and was well esteemed. Whilst poor Mary was nursing her dying mother, this young man had occasion to call at Mr. Heartwell's, who overheard him in talk with his maid Bridget about Mary, and lament the sad disgrace that had befallen her; he added, "I am sure it has been a great concern to me, for I own I liked the young woman; and now that I am my own master, should have liked to have obtained her for my wife, had she preserved a better character." Bridget put in a good word for her, and assured him that her master believed her entirely innocent of the robbery; to this he replied, "whether she had any knowledge of the wicked intentions of those vile servants, nobody can know, but this much has been clearly proved, that she denied the truth of her having been with her, and had broke her solemn promises to her mistress, by keeping them company for some time, therefore, she is no wife for me. I could not be happy unless I could make a friend of my wife, and depend on her truth and faithfulness. Her pretty face and good humour would be nothing to me, without truth and honesty. Next to a good conscience the best thing is a good character. I bless God I have never forfeited my own, nor will I ever marry a woman that has lost hers." Mr. Heartwell was much pleased with the young baker's way of thinking,

and very sorry that Mary had lost such a husband. As his chief concern was to complete the poor young creature's reformation, he thought nothing would make so deep an impression on her mind as this mortifying consequence of her ill behaviour: he resolved on telling her all that the young man had said. He did so; and she took it so much to heart, that she never after held up her head. Her mother's death, which happened soon after, left her without any earthly comfort. What before was liking, was now changed into a strong affection; she saw what a happy lot would have been hers, had she been as true and honest as the man she liked. She lost all her spirits, her mind was always full of bitter remorse and shame. She thought she deserved all the misery she felt, and only prayed that God would accept her sorrow for her sin. She made no complaints, but her looks shewed that health as well as peace of mind had forsaken her.

Her mother's death obliged her to quit the alms-house, and she then told Mr. Heartwell that she was unable to bear the disgrace that she had brought upon herself in that neighbourhood, and was resolved to go and get bread in some distant country, where she was not known. The good man, who felt like a father for every one of his flock when in distress, tried to soothe her, and to persuade her to stay where she was, and

to look to her Heavenly Friend, but he could not prevail.

She could not bear the thoughts of living near Thomas, whom she had lost for ever. So the Vicar gave her what he could spare, to pay her journey and maintain her till she could get an employment, he then gave her a letter to a clergyman, who lived about fifty miles off, begging him to get her into some honest service. She took leave of him with an almost broken heart, and grew so ill and weak on her journey, that when she carried her letter to the clergyman, he told her she appeared too ill for service. In a few days she grew a little better, and told him she thought she could now get her bread if he would have the goodness to recommend her; that she cared not how low the place or the wages was, if she could be maintained, and would do all in her power to give satisfaction. He soon got her into a service; hard labour soon hastened on a decline which her sorrows had begun, and she soon became so ill, that nothing better could be done for her than to place her in an hospital.

Whilst she was there, a letter from Mr. Heartwell informed her that her vile seducers were taken, tried and executed. The spoons were claimed by Elizabeth Bearcroft, Mr. Banks's house-keeper. Sarah Fisher had found them locked up in a cupboard after the rest of the stolen plate was

packed up. She put them in her pocket, as she was going to farmer Boucher's on the Sunday, but recollecting, that perhaps, the marks upon them might lead to her detection, in case of misfortune, she suddenly took it into her head, as she was going away, to leave them with Mary, as before related. Mr. Heartwell had taken the pains to visit the people in prison after their condemnation, and had got from the woman a confirmation of the poor girl's account. Mary languished several weeks in the hospital, and meekly applied her whole mind to obtain the forgiveness of God, through the merits of a Saviour.

The good clergyman assisted her in the great work of repentance, and pointed out to her the only true grounds on which she could hope to obtain it.

Thus death, brought on by grief and shame, at eighteen years of age, was the consequence of bad company, false promises, and FALSE EXCUSES. May all who read this story learn to walk in the strait paths of truth. The way of duty is the way of safety. But "the wicked fleeth where no man pursueth, while the righteous is bold as a lion."

FINIS.